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Krüger, Thomas

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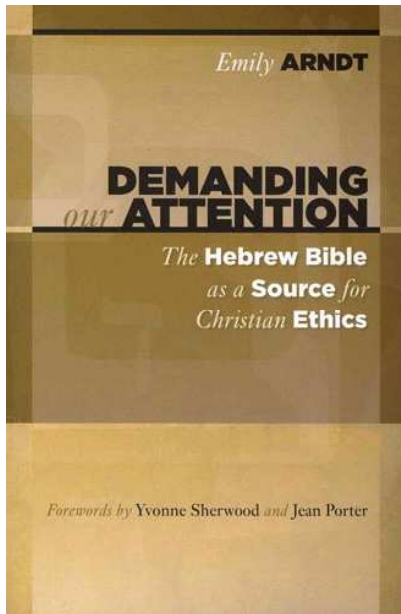
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Emily Arndt

Demanding Our Attention: The Hebrew Bible as a Source for Christian Ethics

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011. Pp. xvi + 197. Paper.
\$30.00. ISBN 9780802865694.

Thomas Krüger
University of Zurich
Zurich, Switzerland

This book was originally written as a dissertation at the University of Notre Dame. Since the author died before its publication, her supervisor Jean Porter prepared the volume for printing, restricting herself to minor, mostly stylistic changes, as she writes in her foreword (xiii–xiv).

The book consists of two parts. The first part (“Defining Territory”) starts with a chapter on “The Hebrew Bible as a (Re)source for Christian Ethics: Contemporary Challenges and Approaches.” Here Arndt presents and discusses how “Biblical scholars and ethicists have grappled with articulating and overcoming the complexities of accounting for the Hebrew Bible in Christian moral theology in a variety of ways during the last twenty-five years or so” (5); among the scholars discussed are John Barton, Gordon Wenham, Bruce C. Birch, and Larry L. Rasmussen. In Arndt’s view, “though so much important work has been done on this topic as it relates to the Bible, it remains the case that when the Hebrew Bible is adduced within a work of Christian ethics, it is typically examined (albeit sometimes in a sophisticated manner) for the sake of discovering or supporting a theological or ethical proposition or set of propositions” (19). Contemporary Christian ethicists, by and large, “tend to use the categories determined by their moral and philosophical training as ways

to distance themselves from the biblical text and, therefore in effect, to stop themselves from reading well” (20).

Two chapters follow to illustrate the critical distance that characterizes modern ethicists’ reading of Old Testament texts and the religious and ethical preconceptions that influences their understanding of the texts: “Critical Distance: The Akedah in the Writings of Ronald Green” and “Religious and Ethical Preconceptions: The Akedah in the Writings of Philip Quinn and Timothy Jackson.” Genesis 22, the so called Akedah (binding [of Isaac]), can be seen as “the ‘hard case’ for a religious ethicist reading the biblical text,” because in this story “the command of God apparently contradicts a very basic demand of human morality” (73). After a detailed examination of the merits and shortcomings of the three authors’ treatment of Gen 22, Arndt concludes that their interpretations suffer from an insufficient consideration of biblical scholarship and an insufficient critical awareness of their use of modern ethical concepts and categories in their reading of ancient texts. Therefore,

[o]ne of the principal concerns of this book is the need for more critical self-awareness in our reading of the Hebrew Bible for Christian ethics. This entails the dual obligation to pay attention to the concerns of the text itself—which means having recourse to biblical scholarship and careful exegesis, as well as the history of interpretation—and to be mindful of the categories and expectations we bring to it from our own line of ethical inquiry.... Consideration of reading, rereading, and retelling the *akedah* as morally relevant acts, as morally formative experiences, will move us beyond what can be observed in the scholarship of Green, Quinn, and Jackson. (74)

This is the program for the second part of the book (“Making the Journey”). This part starts again with a chapter containing comments on selected interpretations of Gen 22 that inspired Arndt’s central thesis (79): “Renewing Acquaintance: Reading the *Akedah* (Again) with Kierkegaard, Philip the Chancellor, and the Rabbis of *Genesis Rabbah*.” In her tribute to Emily Arndt that opens the volume, Yvonne Sherwood rightly but amicably calls this an “eclectic conjunction” of authors (ix). For Arndt,

The presentation of these studies in the history of Genesis 22 interpretation has a threefold purpose. First, even such a selective sampling will demonstrate, once again, that the interpretive history of this text is exceptionally rich and diverse and itself open to a wide array of responses. Analysis and retrieval of these historical sources (like interpretation of the biblical text itself) are shaped by the reader’s own context and presuppositions. Second, in various ways, these very different sources provide insights into what it means to be attentive and engaged readers

(rereaders and retellers) of the story of Abraham's near sacrifice of his son. Third, these short studies will begin to illuminate some ways that the "form" of the literary choices made in our approaches to the biblical text (in)form our readings and thus in turn our moral lives. (79–80)

It is not possible here to enter into details regarding Arndt's discussion of the three historical interpretations of Gen 22. Having summarized the differences between the three readings, she concludes:

All three of these readings ... grant simultaneous attention and importance to the interpreter's ideas and experiences and to the biblical text itself. All three find ways to hold these (sometimes competing) sources together, productively and transformatively, in their ethical reflections. All find ways to engage Scripture in ongoing ways, giving it authority to challenge the world. All use the best methods of interpretation, study, reflection available to them, even if these do not *easily* reveal the text as answering to their preconceptions. All treat the variety of possible responses to the *akedah* with utmost seriousness. (134)

From these examples of past approaches to Gen 22 arise "a range of questions for contemporary ethics: How do we view the biblical text? What are our tools for studying it? What are our possibilities for imagining it? Who are our conversation partners (past and present) and how do we relate to them and each other? What are our ethical concerns in light of Genesis 22? How can we hold together, *now*, our Scriptures, our theologies, our histories, and our ethics in creative, productive, and (trans)formative relationship?" (134).

In her final chapter ("Demands of the Text, Demands of the Other: Why [and How] the *Akedah* Matters for Christian Ethics") Arndt develops her own reading of Gen 22. Her main exegetical informant is Don Levenson (*Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son*, 1993). She points out that many interesting points are left open in the story, such as the emotions and reflections of Abraham, the age of Isaac, and the question whether he agreed with being sacrificed to God. Even regarding the intentions of God Arndt sees "ambiguities" in the text. However, these ambiguities obviously result from her "theological ideas regarding God's omniscience, unchangeability, and even rationality" that are not appropriate to the story of God testing Abraham to find out whether he is willing to sacrifice his child (162). However, in the story, which obviously has an understanding of God different from Arndt's, the intentions of God seem clear and unambiguous. For Arndt, the gaps and ambiguities in the text contribute to "a more profound experience for us in reading" the story. "This experience is our own and, as such, is morally significant," since "[t]he gaps surrounding all the characters in Genesis 22 are like the ambiguities we sometimes face in our moral lives in acting towards and with

others” (169). “The story of Abraham’s near-sacrifice of Isaac is certainly a story capable of disturbing its readers. And critical study of the story reveals it as stranger still, distant from our own ideas about the world and our actions in it. Engagement of the *akedah* critically confronts the reader—her assumptions, intentions, and roles in interpreting the text and in acting in the world. This critical engagement, this trial, calls for the deepening, refining, even modification of our ‘thought and intentions’” (183). Unfortunately, the author does not explain in more detail how our ethical and theological convictions that people should not kill their children and that God would not request them to do so could be deepened, refined, and even modified when we read Gen 22.

On the last text page of her book Arndt presents a rereading of Gen 22 that connects

the status of the beloved son, Isaac, with the status of the biblical text. Loving it, favoring it, recognizing it as “sacred” (a text loved by us and belonging to God) carries with it the willingness to “sacrifice” it, “humiliate” it. Subjecting it to our methods and critical perspectives is the counterpart of allowing the text to emerge in our world with its own value and power. These approaches are our means of traveling to the place that God will show, of performing actions necessary to be in relationship with God and others; they are our donkey, our servants, our knife. Often they are frightening; biblical scholarship and critical theories threaten the very ideas, traditions and faith that bring us to read the text in the first place. Nonetheless, it is through these means, through who we are in our time, place, and scholarship that the *akedah* can be *our* sacred text. It is precisely through these perspectives and the language scholarship provides that the contemporary reader can respond to the call of the *akedah*: “*hinneni*.” (190)

However, there is one important difference between the (near) sacrifice of Isaac and critical biblical scholarship: God did not send his angel to prevent biblical scholars from completing their task. So we know today that the Bible is a collection of reports of experiences, hopes and fears, reflections, and intuitions of human beings that are conditioned by and bound to their times. Therefore it should be no serious problem for contemporary Christian ethicists to concede that not every text in the Bible is true and good—or even that (nearly) the whole Bible is affected by time-conditioned and time-bound errors such as the patriarchal worldview or acceptance of slavery. With regard to Gen 22, there are already important texts in the Bible that are highly critical of sacrificing children or thinking that God could ask people to slaughter their children. For example, according to Deut 12:31 the people who were driven out of the promised land burned their sons and daughters to their gods, but the Israelites should not do so. According to Jer 7:31 it never came to God’s mind that people should burn their sons and daughters. In Ezek 20:25–26 God concedes that he gave the order that every first issue of the womb

(apparently including firstborn children) should be sacrificed, but he says this was a bad law intended to defile the Israelites and render them desolate. Thus, read in the context of the whole biblical canon, Gen 22 can and should be criticized even in a “precritical” (or “postcritical”) reading. Unfortunately, Arndt does not discuss this broader canonical context of the chapter. Moreover, critical biblical scholarship could contribute to a contemporary theological and ethical understanding of Gen 22 by examining what circumstances, experiences, and mindsets favored the idea that children (or animals) could be sacrificed and that a god had the right to expect such sacrifices and which factors led people to question these presuppositions.

As a tribute to Arndt’s method of commenting on texts that comment on Gen 22, I would like to end this review with the remark that another contemporary rereading of the Akedah is in agreement with what is sometimes called “our” theological views as well as with the theological outlook of the Hebrew Bible as a whole: that of Woody Allen, in which God is playful yet critical of those who are *uncritical* in receiving his word (Woody Allen, *Without Feathers* [New York: Ballantine, 1986], 26–27).